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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANJUL 000024

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SUBJECT: THE GAMBIA: READOUT ON CONSULTATIONS WITH SENEGAL

REF: A. 05 BANJUL 860

[1](#)B. BANJUL 749

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOSEPH STAFFORD, REASON 1.4 (B AND D)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Foreign Affairs Permanent Secretary Taal provided upbeat readout on the December 28-29 session of the Senegalese/Gambian Joint Consultative Committee (JCC), explaining the decision to place the Gambia River bridge project under the auspices of the "Gambia River Basin Development Organization (OMVG). He said the two sides addressed in cooperative fashion the heretofore thorny issue of increases in tariffs for the Gambia River ferries heavily used by Senegalese transporters. Taal stressed importance of reviving the "Senegalo-Gambian Permanent Secretariat," while noting that target date of July 1 was contingent on availability of funds. He asserted that the JCC had not taken up the Casamance, while mentioning agreement on plans for joint border patrols. Taal downplayed significance of JCC discussions on legal cooperation. Judging from Taal's readout, this latest JCC session provided further momentum for GOTG/GOS rapprochement, but it remains to be seen how closely the two sides will adhere to the ambitious calendar for next steps on key projects. END SUMMARY.

GAMBIA RIVER BRIDGE PROJECT

[1](#)2. (C) In January 10 conversation, Foreign Affairs Permanent Secretary Ebou Taal provided upbeat readout on the December

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28-29 meeting in Banjul of the Senegalese/Gambian Joint Consultative Committee (JCC), co-chaired by The Gambian Vice President and the Senegalese Prime Minister (ref a). Taal, who participated in the discussions, said the two principal agenda items were the Gambia River bridge project and bilateral transport issues. On the bridge project, he hailed the decision at the JCC to place it under the auspices of the Gambia River Basin Development Organization (OMVG). Taal explained that presenting the project as a regional, rather than bilateral (Senegalese/Gambian) endeavor would give greater encouragement to foreign donors to provide funds. He added that the OMVG context also made sense given the keen interest of all of the organization's four member states (Guinea and Guinea-Bissau as well as The Gambia and Senegal) in the bridge's operation. Taal stated that the existing OMVG projects -- Sambangalou and Keleta dams in Senegal and

Guinea, respectively -- would serve as models for the operation of the Gambia River bridge, as would public works projects of another sub-regional organization, the "Senegal River Basin Development Organization" (OMVS).

TRANSPORT ISSUES

13. (C) Addressing the bilateral transport dossier, Taal said the two sides addressed in cooperative fashion the previously contentious issue of tariffs for the Gambia River ferries heavily used by Senegalese transporters moving between northern Senegal and the Casamance. (NOTE: It was the GOTG's abrupt decision in August to impose hefty tariff increases without prior consultation with the GOS, as required by their bilateral transport agreement, that sparked the two-month bilateral crisis, including closure of Senegal's border with The Gambia. See ref b for background, The tariff increases were rescinded as part of the October 21 agreement in Dakar that defused the crisis. END NOTE.) He said that at the JCC meeting the Senegalese side had concurred in the GOTG's "right" to increase tariffs, provided there was prior consultation, and that the GOTG would soon present a new tariff increase package for review by the GOS. On other transport matters, Taal said the two sides had reached agreement on a long-standing, nitty-gritty issue -- establishment of a "pool" of Senegalese- and Gambian-registered vehicles authorized to transport passengers between the two countries.

PERMANENT SECRETARIAT

14. (C) Taal underscored the importance of another topic at the JCC, the restoration of the "Senegalo-Gambian Permanent Secretariat" that had existed prior to the two countries'

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confederation experiment in the 1980's. He said the restoration of this institution to manage relations between the two governments, in lieu of standard diplomatic missions, was long overdue. Taal said the two sides had yet to decide

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on whether, as before, to have the Secretariat based in Banjul and headed by a Senegalese official. He thought there was a good chance that the Secretariat could be up and running by the target date of July 1, 2006, while acknowledging that the feasibility of this time frame was contingent on the requisite budgetary resources being identified.

CASAMANCE AND OTHER ISSUES

15. (C) Asked whether the JCC had covered the Casamance issue, Taal responded in the negative, citing the parties' past agreement that this dossier was best handled, not at JCC sessions, but in separate discussions between the two countries' senior military and security officials and in contacts at the head-of-state level. Asked about the discussion of "defense and security" issues at the JCC, per the joint communique, he spoke of agreement on plans for joint border patrols. (COMMENT: despite Taal's denial, it is difficult to imagine that the Casamance issue failed to surface in some context at the JCC, especially since military and security officials were present in both delegations. END COMMENT.) Asked about the reference in the joint communique to "reinvigorate" the "Agreement on Mutual Assistance in the Field of Criminal Justice," Taal downplayed its significance, saying the differing origins -- French and British -- of the two countries' modern legal systems somewhat constrained cooperation in the judicial area. When queried about a possible extradition treaty, he professed ignorance as to whether a formal agreement existed, but said that informal arrangements for extradition of common

criminals between the two countries seemed to work effectively.

COMMENT

¶6. (C) Taal, a veteran diplomat, claims in-depth knowledge of official Senegalese/Gambian relations, citing previous service as Ambassador to Senegal and as an official with the Permanent Secretariat in the late 1960's. He portrayed the JCC as fully successful in fulfilling what he cast as the two sides' primary objective -- producing agreement on the way forward regarding the Gambia River bridge project. He also pointed to the next steps and time lines enshrined in the joint communique -- e.g., deliberation on the bridge project at an OMVG meeting in January, bilateral working group meeting on the Secretariat's restoration in February -- as indicative of the two sides' determination to move smartly on key dossiers. Of course, the extent to which the parties adhere to the joint communique's ambitious calendar for projects remains to be seen; but at this point we judge that this latest JCC meeting provided further momentum for GOTG/GOS rapprochement underway since the October 21 summit in Dakar. END COMMENT.
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